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SOME INDICATORS WHICH SHOW THE QUALITY OF THE SCHOOLS IN SLOVENIA

Abstract

Slovenia has three private international schools (American, British, and French), as well as the International Department at Danila Kumar public elementary school. In addition to the national elementary school program, the latter school conducts two accredited international programmes, the Primary Years Programme – PYP, and the Middle Years Programme – MYP (one international programme at two levels – IB programme), which are run under the auspices of the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO), an international non-profit educational organisation. The private international schools offer programmes accredited in their own countries, while the International Department at Danila Kumar Primary School offers an international programme accredited by the global network of IBO schools. This paper draws comparisons in the performance of an international and a Slovenian elementary school, taking as its case-study a school in Slovenia which runs the two programmes side by side. There are statistically significant differences between the two sets of pupils' views on the quality of lessons, the teaching staff and relations with their peers, with both groups identifying a lack of contact and cooperation with pupils from the other programme. There are also several more noticeable differences in the level of knowledge between the two groups, although these differences could not be established as statistically significant. We examine the international school programme, which was positively assessed by the parents of children attending the programme, in somewhat greater depth.

Keywords: Slovenian elementary school, international elementary school, quality of education, satisfaction with teaching, knowledge

Introduction

Slovenia has three private international schools (American, British, and French), as well as the International Department at Danila Kumar public elementary school. In addition to the national elementary school program, the latter school conducts two accredited international programmes, the Primary Years Programme – PYP, and the Middle Years Programme – MYP (one international programme at two levels – IB programme), which are run under the auspices of the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO), an international non-profit educational organisation. The private international schools offer programmes accredited in their own countries, while the International Department at Danila Kumar Primary School offers an international programme accredited by the global network of IBO schools. The international programme is designed to encourage pupils to acquire knowledge, and to develop the approaches and skills they need to participate actively and responsibly in a changing and ever more complex world (Hill, 2002; Heckmann, 2008).

The basic characteristics of the IBO are a balanced core curriculum, and proper monitoring and assessment of knowledge, which helps pupils develop (Beane, 1990; IBO, 2006; Hare, 2010):

- an ability to learn how to integrate the knowledge and skills they acquire into real life, and to use that knowledge and those skills;
- responsibility for and a positive attitude towards their own study, with an emphasis on continuing education and development, on learning how to learn, and on using different sources of information and knowledge;
- international and intercultural understanding, joint responsibility, and a sensitivity towards their fellow human beings and the environment;
- an ability to participate actively in local and world affairs.

High academic achievements and a good level of knowledge are not the only important aspects of the programme. The basic objective is for every pupil to develop in accordance with their own abilities and to become a responsible and active citizen. Teaching and all communications take place in the English language, with pupils from years one to eight learning Slovenian as the language of their host environment (Luchtenberg, 2004; Marshman, 2010; Cankar et. al, 2011).

Details of the research

Some studies (Klun et. al, 2013; Fredrickson, 2009) show that positive attitudes, language skills and common interests are the primary factors that encourage cooperation. In the text below we will compare some of the elements of the educational process of IB and Slovenian public elementary schools educational process. We collected the data for the research in the first half of 2011 from both elementary school programmes conducted at Danila Kumar Primary School: the international programme and the Slovenian elementary school programme.

Purpose and objectives of the research

The purpose of the research was to become familiar with how the international programme at Danila Kumar Primary School works, and to compare it with the Slovenian elementary school programme that runs alongside it. The goals of the research were as follows:

- to determine the opinions of pupils in the international programme on their lessons, and to compare them with the opinions of pupils in the Slovenian programme;
- to test the knowledge of pupils in the international programme and compare it with the knowledge of pupils in the Slovenian programme;
- to determine the opinions of parents of pupils in the international programme regarding the way the school programme is carried out.

Research method and description of instruments

For the first objective, we sought the opinions of pupils in the international school programme regarding their lessons, comparing these opinions with those expressed by pupils in the Slovenian elementary school programme. We used a survey method for this first objective. The questionnaire for pupils in the international programme consisted of three groups of questions. The first group related to lessons and teachers, the second to integration within the school and the

relationship between the primary school as a whole and the pupils in the international programme, and the third to the relationship between pupils in the international programme and those in the Slovenian programme. The pupils ranged their opinions on five-point scales, from 'not true at all' (1) to 'completely true' (5). The questionnaire for pupils in the Slovenian programme was similar in content to the questionnaire for the pupils in the international programme.

For the second objective, we tested pupils from both programmes across all three terms. We tested pupils in mathematics and environmental studies in the first term, in mathematics, society and natural sciences in the second term, and in mathematics, social sciences, natural sciences, and technical studies and technology in the third term (TIMSS, 2007; 2011). Pupils from both programmes took a written examination. The tests were in the English language for pupils in the international programme and in the Slovenian language for pupils in the Slovenian programme.

For the third objective, we canvassed the opinions of parents of pupils attending the international programme. The parents' survey was conducted by staff at the school. The questionnaire was in English and was the same questionnaire used by the international school for self-evaluation purposes. The questionnaire focused on the level of cooperation between the school and parents, the provision of information to parents, and the opinion of parents on the programme and on the way the programme was carried out. The parents ranged their opinions on five-point scales, from 'disagree strongly' (1) to 'agree strongly' (5).

Description of the sample and the data collection procedure

We tested the first objective using the data collected from a sample of 44 pupils in the international programme (years five to eight) and a sample of 92 pupils in the Slovenian programme. The research covered all pupils in years five to eight in the international programme and one class from each year from years six to nine in the Slovenian programme. Both groups of pupils were surveyed in March 2011 using a printed questionnaire completed during class time. The response rate was very high – over 90%. We also tested a selected group of pupils from both programmes (second objective). We tested pupils from years two, five and eight of the international programme and from years three, six, eight and nine of the Slovenian programme. Between 6 and 13 pupils from the international programme and between 17 and 24 pupils from the Slovenian programme were given a series of individual tests. Although a 100% response rate could not be achieved owing to the absence of a number of pupils, the rate was nevertheless high (over 90%), giving the data a high degree of reliability. The tests were held in May 2011. In order to test the third objective, we surveyed all parents whose children were attending the international programme at the time the data was collected. Forty-nine parents were surveyed; most (58.3%) had one child at the school, 33.3% had two children at the school and 8.3% had three children at the school. Parents were surveyed using a printed questionnaire. They were surveyed in March 2011 during a parents' meeting. Based on the number of enrolled children, we estimate that the response rate for parents was over 75%.

Data processing procedure

The data obtained from the surveys of pupils and parents was processed statistically. The averages and the associated standard deviations for individual

selected indicators (indicators from the pupils' questionnaire in which there were statistically significant differences according to programme were selected) and for structured variables (the sum of individual indicators from a specific group of contents) are calculated and presented. In constructing the variables, the indicators were first checked using the Cronbach's alpha measure of consistency. The results of the pupils' tests were also statistically processed. The average marks attained in an individual test are calculated and presented, along with the associated standard deviations. The differences between the averages (for the survey responses as well as the test results) for the pupils from the two programmes were verified using an appropriate t-test).

Results

The data obtained in relation to the first objective shows that pupils attending the international programme rated their lessons and teachers considerably higher than was the case with pupils attending the Slovenian programme. We found no statistically significant differences between the pupils from the two programmes in their assessment of the school as a whole, nor in their assessment of the level of contact and cooperation between the pupils within their respective programmes. Pupils from both programmes believed that they had greater contact with peers within their own programme than with pupils from the other programme at the school.

The statistically significant differences between the pupils of the two groups regarding lessons appear chiefly in the assessment given to the help provided to pupils by teachers, cooperation with teachers in various projects, teachers' friendliness, pupils' ability to follow lessons without difficulty, whether lessons were interesting, whether teachers made appropriate connections between different subjects in class, and whether pupils were encouraged to solve problems themselves.

Pupils attending the international programme gave a high rating to the question regarding contact and cooperation with other pupils attending the international programme; the same did not apply to cooperation and social contact with those attending the Slovenian programme.

More detailed views and explanations were provided in the contributions of both headteachers at the school. Both were very specific in mentioning the numerous and wide-ranging forms of contact and cooperation between pupils from the two programmes at school, as well as their contact with the narrower and wider local environment. They also gave reasons why closer contact and cooperation between pupils might be hindered:

The obstacles to more thorough cooperation and contact between the pupils in the international programme and the other pupils at the school, as well as pupils from other primary schools, are exactly the same as the obstacles to cooperation between pupils in the national programme and those from other schools. First of all, high-quality lessons have to be provided within the syllabus, and the lack of funds also presents an obstacle. There are also organisational problems caused by the need to obtain the written consent of parents for every activity that is not part of normal classroom lessons. (Headteacher of the school).

I don't agree that contact and cooperation between the pupils of the two programmes is not good. Statistics don't always reflect the real situation. These are two organisational units in charge of conducting their own programmes. I believe that cooperation between the two departments is good, as is cooperation with other schools. We also work with schools abroad. The reasons why pupils and parents feel that contact and cooperation are not as good as they could be is that the curriculum in the international department is different and does not permit regular cooperation; the activity days at the international department are linked to that curriculum, so they don't always coincide with activities taking place in the Slovenian department; pupils attending the international programme do not speak Slovenian and some do not speak very good English; lessons take place across several separate buildings; many pupils from the international department do not live close to the school, so they cannot socialise after school; pupils attending the international programme stay for only a short period of time and so cannot establish deeper ties with other pupils; and many teachers in the Slovenian department do not speak English, which means that they cannot take part in activities. (Head of the international programme).

One can confirm, on the basis of the interview held with the school heads, that the school does organise a fair number of different activities involving pupils from both programmes.

For the second objective, we present a comparison in the levels of knowledge of pupils from the two programmes. The results show that pupils from the international programme attained a higher grade average in mathematics, social studies, and natural sciences in the second term, and in social sciences, and technical studies and technology in the third term. Their Slovenian peers were better in mathematics and environmental studies in the first term, and in mathematics and natural sciences in the third term. Despite the differences in the grades attained in individual subject areas, the differences in the averages are not statistically significant.

For the third objective, we present the views of parents of pupils in the international programme. Parents rated all statements on cooperation between school, parents, pupils and others fairly highly, generally with an average of '4' or above; the averages were also higher than '4' in all structured variables. Parents believe that cooperation and communication with the school is good, and that they are provided with sufficient information; they also gave positive assessments of the programme and of the way the programme was conducted at the school.

Despite the high marks given in their responses, some parents used the open part of the questionnaire to draw attention to some of the expectations that were not being fully met; these were, in part, linked to a perceived lack of contact and cooperation between pupils in the international programme and their 'closest environment', i.e. pupils from the Slovenian programme at this and other elementary schools.

Conclusion

The findings show that there are characteristic differences in their views regarding lessons, teachers and cooperation with peers between pupils attending the international school and pupils attending the Slovenian elementary school. The

pupils attending the international programme are satisfied with their lessons, their teachers and the school as a whole. They were, however, fairly critical in their assessment of the level of contact and cooperation with other schools, and even with the pupils attending the Slovenian elementary school programme, socialising with them, in their free time as well, only to a small extent.

One can confirm, on the basis of the interview held with the school heads, that the school does organise a fair number of different activities involving pupils from both programmes. It is clear that certain factors or circumstances have a stronger impact on pupils and are decisive in determining their perception of contact and cooperation with their peers. Although the differences established in the average marks attained in the tests between the pupils from the two programmes are not statistically significant, it is nevertheless possible to establish slightly larger deviations with regard to certain tasks/content areas in all subjects in both programmes.

Parents are also satisfied, giving detailed analyses of certain aspects of life and work at the school in their statements and comments. They also suggest a number of measures to further improve the quality of life and work at the school.

Despite the several limitations imposed by the methodology employed in this research, it is possible to conclude that the international school is successful and, in this respect, substantially comparable with the Slovenian elementary school programme. The results do indicate a number of specific differences; however, these are not of a nature that would enable us to conclude that one programme is more successful than another.

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